

STATE HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY OF IOWA  
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

# The Annals of Iowa

---

Volume 51 | Number 6 (Fall 1992)

pps. 643-645

---

## The Popular Mood of America, 1860-1890

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 1992 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

"The Popular Mood of America, 1860-1890." *The Annals of Iowa* 51 (1992), 643-645.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9699>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

plants wore down and their return on assets became the lowest of any industry. The catharsis came in 1970 with the Penn Central bankruptcy, the largest in the nation's history. Lest the whole transport system collapse, Congress created Conrail and in 1980 passed the Staggers Act, which freed the rail industry. With deregulation, Martin points out, has come the railways' rebirth. Their future, he cautiously avers, looks bright indeed.

*Railroads Triumphant* is a fun book, written in the patented Albro Martin style. Always provocative, funny by turns, learned, full of puns, nursery rhyme allusions, and just plain Martinisms, he takes what could have been the driest of topics and makes it appear fundamental to our very existence. On the other hand, he often overstates his case. Railroaders were not always disinterested servants of the public. Often their policies did hurt people economically. They did corrupt legislatures in states such as Pennsylvania and California and often bribed and schemed their way to prominence. But Martin's book provides a needed historical corrective to the sometimes prevailing view that huge corporations and railroads were always bad. *Railroads Triumphant* is a must read.

*The Popular Mood of America, 1860-1890*, by Lewis O. Saum. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. 284 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$37.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD S. TAYLOR, ILLINOIS HISTORIC PRESERVATION AGENCY

This book is a sequel to Saum's *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* (1980). The two volumes together describe a subtle but profound change in outlook among "humble but literate white Protestant Christians" (3) belonging to America's "rural mainstream" (15) based on the author's extensive reading of their "letters, diaries, and commonplace jottings" (2). Simply put, Saum argues that average Americans living in the post-Civil War era "allowed their attention to be claimed far more by the things of this world" (12) than had their pious predecessors.

Saum's devout pre-Civil War Americans bear little resemblance to the optimistic entrepreneurs that usually populate our antebellum histories. He depicts them instead as somber, intensely pious, and other-worldly people largely resigned to their fates in a world ordered by God's providence and far less concerned with politics or progress than with death and prayer. All that changed, he insists, with the Civil War and the rush west. The chaotic randomness of those events fos-

tered in the common people a "skeptical spirit" (23) that eroded their religious faith and encouraged them to replace the "habitual language of God's agency" (14) with the worldly vocabularies of luck, self, education, politics, and enterprise. Although post-Civil War Americans seldom denied God or God's plan, they wrote in a less godly idiom and exhibited far more interest in this world than the next. God was not dead, just relegated to a supporting role, especially outside the South. What Saum has documented, he believes, is the birth of modernity in America.

Historians have customarily dated modernity's arrival somewhat earlier, but the self-reliant attitudes that scholars have taught us to expect in antebellum writings do not appear with regularity in Saum's sources until the postwar period. "Emerson had not been entirely wrong," he writes, "only premature" (133). Nor do Saum's common people seem at all concerned with the emergence of evolutionary naturalism or the rise of the city, two developments that loom large in most tellings of Gilded Age intellectual and religious history. It was not Charles Darwin but the Civil War and the West that played havoc with their faith. Saum self-consciously attends to the many ways his findings relate to received opinions and often delights in taking issue with "modern historical scholarship" (9), though this book is far less pugnacious and iconoclastic than his first provocative volume, which fairly crackled with dissent.

Religion's receding influence had important consequences for the way Saum's informants wrote about such matters as death, marriage, education, and politics. They naturalized death, idealized marriage and education, and wrote much more frequently of politics and social reform than before. They spoke of prayer, sermons, and revivals less often, but references to newspapers, novels, and popular entertainment appeared with more regularity. Christmas seemed to crowd out Thanksgiving in their writings, which took on a breezier, earthier style that would have seemed impious to preceding generations. Words such as *privilege*, *meeting*, *satisfied*, *season*, and *interesting* previously possessed purely religious connotations, but now developed new and more secularized meanings. The many quotations and brief biographical vignettes with which Saum loads his text make it sometimes difficult to follow, but they are often poignant, occasionally amusing, and invariably bring readers closer to the sources.

Those sources, as Saum candidly acknowledges, have their limitations. Racial, ethnic, and religious minorities do not appear. Nor, for the most part, do city-dwellers. Saum concedes that considerations of language and culture placed such groups beyond his reach, and that seems fair. But whether the attitudes of his plain but literate rural

Protestant white folks really add up to the "popular mood" of Gilded Age America is a good deal more problematic. Saum's research, which at first appears prodigious, is limited in still other ways. By my count, his bibliography lists 277 manuscript collections located in fourteen states. Iowa is well represented in the ten collections that he cites from the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa City, and references to the state are scattered throughout his book. However, most of Saum's unpublished sources come from repositories in midwestern, southern, and plains states, a regional bias that further erodes his claim to have captured the national ethos.

That Saum's reach may have exceeded his grasp should not detract from his considerable accomplishments since "popular mood" is probably a will-o'-the-wisp anyway. He has written a wonderful book filled with challenging insights, a work that will profit both scholars and lay people alike.

*Tradition and Transition: Amish Mennonites and Old Order Amish, 1800-1900*, by Paton Yoder. Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History no. 31. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991. 359 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$28.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY STEVEN D. RESCHLY, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

In 1874 the Amish *Diener Versammlung* (ministers' meeting) convened in John Conrad's barn just northeast of Wayland, Iowa. Up to a thousand people attended the conference assemblies. Between sessions, an Amish bishop from Ohio told Preacher Benjamin Eicher of Wayland that he should keep to Amish tradition and wear hooks-and-eyes on his coat instead of buttons—"a minister should wear clothing that would make it possible for anyone to distinguish between a preacher and a lawyer or banker." The change-minded Eicher later led his congregation out of the Amish fold to become General Conference Mennonites.

This story from Iowa fits nicely into Paton Yoder's pioneer history of nineteenth-century Amish church affairs. Yoder gathered disparate and fragmentary sources, combined them with some new caches of letters and documents, and created a coherent narrative of a little-known period in Amish and Mennonite history. He included every Amish community in his account, avoiding the tendency to focus only on the larger and more famous locations in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Yoder's book places Amish and Mennonites in Iowa and the Midwest into a context of North American Amish history and life.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.